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Contra Chief Asks Deadline on Change

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MIAMI, Feb. 18 — Arturo Cruz, the contra leader who is engaged in a struggle for control of the anti-Sandinista movement, is expected to set a deadline for major changes Thursday in the American-backed rebel organization, according to several of Mr. Cruz's aides.

In an interview here late Monday night, Mr. Cruz said the changes he contemplated include a new, expanded civilian directorate with complete control of the movement's funds; the forced retirement of several far-right rebel officials, and the integration of the main rebel army in Honduras into a new overall insurgent force headed by civilian officials and under an expanded military command.

Difficult Conditions

The aides said Mr. Cruz intends to remain a member of the rebel leadership long enough to see that the changes are made, but that his decision on whether to stay on will depend on whether State Department officials pledge that they will support his efforts.

The conditions demanded by Mr. Cruz appear to be difficult to achieve in the midst of a growing war in Nicaragua and sharp internal disputes among contra leaders. In addition, Congressional opposition and divisions among Administration officials may also obstruct what amounts to a nearly total shift in the organization and management of the contras.

Aides to Mr. Cruz, who emerged as the pre-eminent contra leader this week after a showdown with his chief rival among rebel leaders, Adolfo Calero, said his decision to postpone a previous threat to resign was made after he received a telegram Tuesday from the top contra military commander in Honduras, pledging that the main rebel army will support changes in the movement.

The telegram from the commander, Col. Enrique Bermúdez, was arranged by American officials and was one of several conditions that Mr. Cruz had demanded from the Administration and other rebel leaders as part of the reorganization of the contra movement, senior rebel and Administration officials said.

They conceded, however, that it remains to be seen if Colonel Bermúdez and other contra commanders who once served the Somoza regime in Nicaragua will fulfill their pledge to accept changes. The leaders of the main rebel army, known as the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, headed by Mr. Calero, resisted a similar effort last year that they also said they supported.

'Paper Promises'

In the interview, Mr. Cruz said that he no longer trusts "paper promises" of change that he said had been violated in the past by the Reagan Administration and rival rebel officials. Instead, he said, he will demand at a news conference in Washington Thursday that the reorganization of the contras begin immediately, and that he will resign if the changes are not fully carried out.

"If it does not happen quickly, I don't feel obliged to be part of this," Mr. Cruz said. "My intention is to bring immediate reforms. If they don't happen, I will resign." Both Mr. Cruz and Alfonso Robelo, the third main contra leader, who is a close ally, said that they are not sure Colonel Bermúdez will carry out his promise, but said that they are willing to give him a chance. "We want to see if Bermúdez and the other commanders can accept real civilian authority," Mr. Robelo said in an interview in Costa Rica Sunday. "We don't want their heads, we want to see if we can work together."

Mr. Cruz, Mr. Robelo and Mr. Calero were the co-leaders of the political directorate of the American-backed United Nicaraguan Opposition, an umbrella group formed to unite various anti-Sandinista insurgent groups.

Mr. Calero was forced to resign from the directorate on Monday under pressure from the Administration, which accepted demands by Mr. Cruz, Mr. Robelo and key members of Congress that the more conservative leader be ousted. Mr. Calero's critics said that he had become the chief opponent of effective reorganization.

But Mr. Calero has not yet resigned from his more powerful position as political head of the Honduran-based army commanded by Colonel Bermúdez, who has been a close ally of Mr. Calero for the last four years.

Mr. Cruz said he suspects Mr. Calero may now try to obstruct the reorganization effort in an attempt to force Mr. Cruz to carry out his threat to resign if changes are not made quickly.

'A System of Reforms'

"Adolfo has the full right to return and pursue his conservative beliefs," Mr. Cruz said. "But he is going to have to do it under a system of reforms."

Mr. Calero could not be reached for

Civilian control and the ousting of rightists.

comment today. His aides said he was out of the country.

Some officials of the Central Intelligence Agency are reportedly upset by Mr. Calero's departure. They argue that despite his political shortcomings, Mr. Calero worked for four years to build the only rebel military force that has shown a capacity to fight, according to two Administration officials.

"Adolfo is a terrible political leader, but he made this thing hang together and no one is sure these new guys can keep it from falling apart," said one of the Administration officials.

Criticisms of Cruz

Both his critics and his supporters say Mr. Cruz suffers from chronic indecisiveness, that he is ambivalent about his role as an exile leader and is prone to naïve political judgments.

This week, Mr. Cruz said he would prefer not to be the main rebel leader. Instead, he said he hopes to force reforms, organize a new civilian directorate, and then partly withdraw from the fray, acting as a sort of elder statesman to a movement whose daily conduct would be in the hands of others.